

## After the Election

Matthew 5:1-10

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Our time on this earth is short.

If we're lucky, we get 80 years. Some of us get fewer than that. If we're really unlucky, we live to 100 and have that many more years to endure all the indignities of aging!

Our time is short. We need to know *who we are* and *what we are here for*.

Let's do that this morning. I'd like you to introduce yourself to the people on your left and your right. Now pair up. Make sure everyone has a partner.

Look your partner in the eye. I know this is awkward. Turn your body if you need to. Look them right into the pupil. See the contours of their face, nose, eyebrows, cheeks, and chin—all the wonderful hard-earned creases and wrinkles. As you look into their eyes, see how receptive they are to light. This is what it looks like to be made in the image of God. You may break your gaze. Thank your partner.

One more request. Reach out to your right and left and hold hands. If you're really squeamish about this, you don't have to. But I hope you will; it's important. Holding hands now? Close your eyes. Take some deep breaths. How incredible are these hands you're holding? How sensitive these hands are. How useful. These hands can make things. Fix things. They can feed. They can heal. These hands can comfort. We have incredibly capable hands. And they fit so nicely together. It's almost like hands were made to hold each other's. You can let go now.

Who are you? You are a Child of God! What are you here for? You are here to love others.

I know it's been a long week. Elections are emotional. There are always winners and losers and losing is hard. If you're happy about the outcome, it's a nice boost. If you're sad, I get it. It's OK to be invested in these things. Politics are important. It's a way we try and love our fellow citizens. By trying to make a world of laws and policies in which every person can realize freedom and dignity and safety and opportunity.

I'm not happy about the results. Donald Trump is a sad man. When I look at him, I don't see Jesus. Which makes me sound a lot like a 1990s Christian conservative...

I want us to read Jesus' blessings from Matthew's gospel this morning because for me they're always a helpful re-set. When I need to calibrate my own life and when I'm trying to figure out who I am in this world as a follower of Jesus, I always find these blessings helpful. They convey Jesus' worldview—it's a worldview that hasn't stopped surprising us for 2000 years. These blessings still take all of our conventional wisdom and all of our political consensus about what's important, and they say, "guess again." "Here's what I'm noticing," Jesus says. "Here's what I'm paying attention to":

1. First, it's those of us who are poor in spirit—down on our luck, just scraping by—God is especially present for you.
2. Jesus says we are blessed when we mourn someone we love—our grief, our loss somehow makes way for a deeper gratitude.
3. The meek—the weak, the humble—they run this place. Look to them if you want to know what authentic power looks like.
4. Those who want to do the right thing—even if you're not successful—you're satisfied.
5. When you forgive those who hurt you, you know wholeness.
6. If you keep kindness in your heart, you know God.
7. If you can make peace in a time of conflict—if you can see the image of God in your enemy—you are one of God's favorite kids.

These blessings are still so strange to me. My first instinct is still, after all these years, to argue with them. To qualify them. To find exceptions. To say, "yes, but that's not realistic."

These blessings are inescapably strange. They never quite feel comfortable. They provoke us. They judge us. They beckon us into something deeper, something better.

At times like this, when so many of us have experienced shock at the events of the world, and we're trying to re-organize and re-orient our lives, we should come back to the basics. You are a beloved child of God, made in God's image. You are made for the purpose of love. But you are also invited to live in the direction of the Beatitudes. These blessings are strange. They imagine a world that doesn't "fit" with the world we live in. They describe a "good life" that isn't the one our politics and culture lift up. Our world organizes itself around fear, selfishness, cruelty—not humility, mercy, and righteousness. Jesus even says at the end of these Beatitudes, "if you embrace my way of engaging the world, you will be persecuted."

Following Jesus is no picnic. You will always experience a disconnect between the world's norms and what Jesus calls forth. When there's a choice, we're supposed to stick with Jesus. What this means is that the world will never quite feel right to you. The world will

never feel like home. Dr. King liked to use the term “maladjusted.” He said followers of Jesus have to be maladjusted to certain norms in our world. Maladjusted to the racism that still clings to institutions and people. Maladjusted to militarism—the idea that power is about bullying, or having more and bigger guns. Maladjusted to materialism—that possessing and accumulating wealth is good. I would add to King’s list that a follower of Jesus has got to be maladjusted to climate destruction, even that which hides itself under the name “economic development”—you can’t develop the economy while destroying the conditions for life. And we must be maladjusted to patriarchy—to the falsehood that men should rule over women, that a man who rapes women is preferable to a well-qualified woman when it comes to leading us. Following Jesus requires that you be maladjusted to things that other people say are just fine, to things that other people have rationalized by saying it’s “just the way the world works.”

The world is not as it should be. Faithfulness requires cognitive dissonance—you feel an estrangement from your country, from your neighbors, and even from parts of yourself. It’s that last part that’s key. We are all works in progress. Don’t stand in judgment of your neighbors for conforming too much to the world, for failing to embrace the love ethic of Jesus. Whenever I read the Beatitudes, I’m chastened—about how far away my own instinctive worldview is to the worldview of Jesus. Jesus still has a lot of work to do on me. On each of us. Let’s commit ourselves again to yielding to that work.

What does that look like? On Wednesday morning first thing, Elder Jordan Helms sent me an excerpt from Howard Thurman that I’ve included in your bulletin today. This congregation spent time with Thurman last fall. I hope you remember the themes of his teaching: “centering down,” spending time in the quiet, going within ourselves. Thurman’s bold hunch is that we don’t get oriented to God by looking outside of us, but by going inside. Thurman insisted that inside of each of us, there is a deep, unfathomable stillness, and if and when we find that stillness, we will find our union with God and our kinship with all living things. Another way of thinking about this is that the truth of the Beatitudes won’t be self-evident by looking around us, but by going inside ourselves.

In times of disorientation, like this moment may be for you, Thurman’s advice is simple and practical. Begin by attending to the world immediately around you—but not to politics. Instead, focus on “the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained. Birds still sing,” Thurman writes, “the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields.”

Walk outside every day. Minute by minute you can witness the miracle of the last leaves giving up their green and going all in on orange or gold. I was sitting at a meeting last week and I looked over at two colleagues and they laughing and pointing at their phones: they were comparing notes on their bird ID apps, gleefully describing the birds they had seen at their feeders. The birds are singing. Thurman reminds us that there is a deeper rhythm than the election cycle. You belong to *that* rhythm. Wendell Berry, in “The Peace of Wild Things,” says

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief.  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Thurman writes more about the “little graces” that ennoble and dignify us: “The heart is still inspired by the kind word and gracious deed.” When we can't find love in the way justice is being meted out or in the way society is being organized, you can find truth in the small loves. Lean in to the gifts of your hands. Make a meal. Take cookies next door. Make music. Fix something. Call a friend whose voice haven't heard in a long time. Go don't sit and doomscroll. Get over to DEAM, our local food pantry, and sign up to volunteer a shift.

Thurman's advice is not to bury your head in the sand. He's not saying to be ignorant of the harm. Evil exists in our world. Thurman had felt its sting. We're not called to naivete. Our political opponents harbor evil. So can we. Evil shows up when we hurt other people and then try to find legitimate reasons for that hurt. Evil draws false distinctions between people and evil apports justice unequally based on those false distinctions. Evil is what tells you to be afraid and then act out of your fear. Evil is what says there's never enough for all of us, so I'll take mine and you're on your own. Thurman says you have to be able to see evil. To recognize it. Don't let evil inside. Don't give it any space within—don't let the “normal,” “justifiable” evils that infect our common life to have any safe harbor within you. Center down. Find that depth within you. In that depth, you find your union with the Divine Love, you union with all of God's beloved. In that depth, the world of the Beatitudes is nurtured and flourishes.

In this community, we will help you sit with the cognitive dissonance of seeking a Beatitude-shaped life in the middle of world that still normalizes racism, militarism, materialism, climate destruction, and patriarchy. In this community, we will lean into the simple graces of the peace of wild things, and the care of one another. In this community, you can cry when virtue and human beings are harmed. In this community, you can affirm the belovedness of every child of God and accept a world that brackets out immigrants and trans young people. In this community, you can affirm women's rights to reproductive healthcare, and you can work to end homelessness and food insecurity in DeKalb County. In this community, your broken trust in the capacity of people to embrace the world of the Beatitudes can be healed and can grow.

In this place, no matter what happens in the world, you will never have to wait long to be reminded who you are and what you are created to do:

you are a child of God,  
you are made by love for love,  
we are bound together by the never-ending, never failing, saving movement of God's  
unconditional love.